



Driver Fatigue Dangers

Over the last few decades, campaigns against drunken driving have helped reduce the proportion of alcohol-related traffic fatalities, led to tougher DUI laws, and raised public awareness about the dangers of driving drunk. Recently, another contributing factor in traffic accidents is receiving similar public attention: driving drowsy.

The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates that drowsiness or fatigue is a principal factor in approximately 100,000 police-reported crashes annually (about 1.5% of all crashes). In 2005 in Virginia, 3,374 drivers were tired or apparently asleep at the time of their accident, statistics from the Department of Motor Vehicles show – likely only a fraction of the actual number, police say.

Like drunk drivers, the drowsy driver's judgment, reaction time, and memory are impaired. Moreover, doctors point out that drowsiness is not a warning sign; it's the last thing that happens before you fall asleep, whether you want to or not.

According to the NHTSA, a typical crash related to sleepiness:

- Occurs late at night, in the early morning or mid-afternoon
- Involves a single vehicle and a driver who is alone and who does not attempt to avoid a crash
- Happens on a high-speed road
- Is likely to be serious

Who Is Most At Risk?

Everyone is susceptible to driver fatigue. Who doesn't get tired? Especially at risk are drivers who are:

- Sleep-deprived or fatigued
- Driving long distances without rest breaks
- Driving through the night, the early afternoon, or at other times when they are normally asleep
- Taking medication that increases sleepiness or drinking alcohol
- Driving alone
- Driving on long roads without much change in scenery
- Frequent travelers such as those on business trips



Warning Signs

Drivers as well as passengers should look for the warning signs of fatigue, such as if you:

- Can't remember the last few miles driven
- Drift from their lanes or hit a rumble strip
- Experience wandering or disconnected thoughts
- Yawn repeatedly
- Have difficulty focusing or keeping your eyes open
- Tailgate or miss traffic signs
- Have trouble keeping your head up
- Jerk your vehicle back into the lane

Preventing Fatigue

There are ways to prevent driver fatigue, starting even before you get behind the wheel:

First, drivers should get a good night's sleep. While this varies from individual to individual, the average person requires about 8 hours of sleep a night.

Second, plan to drive long trips with a companion. Passengers can help look for early warning signs of fatigue or take over the driving duties when needed. Passengers should stay awake to talk to the driver.

If you're going to be driving, avoid alcohol and medications (over-the-counter and prescribed) that may impair performance. Once on the road, to avoid driver fatigue:

- Schedule regular stops at least every 100 miles or 2 hours.
- Recognize when you are in danger of falling asleep.
- Don't rely on the radio or opening a window to keep you awake.
- If tired, pull off into a safe area away from traffic and take a brief nap (15 to 45 minutes).
- Eat sensibly and avoid heavy meals.
- Drink coffee or an energy drink to promote short-term alertness.

